

Indians are ready and armed to win the AL Central if Minnesota falters



2. Cleveland Indians: I really want to put this team ahead of Minnesota. Why? Well, because the Indians at one point in the season had a chance to take command of the division, but failed to do so. Cleveland played their best baseball during the months of June and July where they earned a record of 31-25 over those two months. What hurt them besides their initial slide after getting even with Minnesota was how they started and finished. The Indians won just nine of 22 games in April and went 27-31 from August 1st on. Five players made the American League All-Star squad selected by Yankees Manager Joe Torre, in conjunction with Major League Baseball. One of them was not 1B/DH Travis Hafner, who ranked second in the league in OPS behind Boston's Manny Ramirez. Not to mention, the gritty 27-year-old had ten more base hits (150) than games played. Cleveland's team MVP: Catcher Victor Martinez - .300BA, 30HR, and 100RBI production capabilities.

As far as the rotation goes, the Indians may have the best one in this division. C.C. Sabathia has already made a name for himself as a big, yet effective left-hander. He's got 54 wins to his credit in only four major league seasons. Sabathia wants to get his ERA down to where Jake Westbrook (14-9 3.38ERA) has his at. Westbrook also pitched five complete games, most in the AL Central a season ago. Then you add a guy like Kevin Millwood to the dynamic and the Indians' starting pitching could truly be dynamic.

On paper this team's bullpen still looks like a mess. Question is can a consistent closer emerge and will Arthur Rhodes, who was acquired in a trade, contribute enough innings? Rhodes has been on a number of teams like Oakland, Seattle and Pittsburgh just to name a few. At 35 years of age it'll be interesting to see what he can do when he's out on the mound. Scott Sauerbeck may be able to ease some of the pain, but that is only one guy, someone with the label 'marginally good' instead of 'very good' or considered great.



Indians batter Travis Hafner (AP/Tony Dejak) was

hit by a pitch 17 times last season and is returning from off-season elbow surgery. Hafner is optimistic that those two things will not affect his production in pursuit of helping Cleveland make the playoffs.

One guy to keep an eye on is 3B/IF Jose Hernandez. At the age of 35, Hernandez will be used in a utility scenario. The Indians hope to get enough production out of him that he does not have to be sent down to AAA. He's been around awhile and still has not figured out a few pitches; the breaking ball for instance is one he has a rough time hitting.

Aaron Boone actually had more success in Cincinnati before his historic home run vs. the Red Sox in the 2003 ALCS. Boone hopes to re-discover his stroke for even medium range in '05. Ronnie Belliard had an absolutely fabulous 2004 season. Skipper Eric Wedge has the luxury of moving up and down the lineup for the 150-155 games he plays. Along with Casey Blake and Coco Crisp, the threesome combined for 169 extra base hits (including home runs). Crisp might stand out the most for the simple he had the highest average (.297) and stole an Indians season best 20 bases if you discount departed players Matt Lawton and Omar Vizquel. Making up for the 23 steals via Lawton and 19 by Vizquel will be essential, or shall we say quintessential? Until Jody Gerut (.252 11HR 51RBI) is ready to return, promising young outfielder Grady Sizemore could add a boost to the team's speed department. Sizemore stole 15 in 101 games at AAA Buffalo. Alongside shortstop Jhonny Peralta, who gets an opportunity right away at the next level, the Indians have two near bona-fide guys in the making.

One of the underrated factors I see with this team is Cliff Lee, yes, Cliff Lee. In spite of posting a poor 5.43ERA, Lee won 14 of 22 decisions and poses problems for unfamiliar hitters that have yet to get a read on him. Confidence has to have been built with him, and the experience of fifth starter Scott Elarton, who does not win you games or lose them, is the difference now compared to 2002-03.

Bottom Line: The bottom line with the Indians is they probably have the best starting rotation in the division and debatably the top order in the AL Central. Problem is A.) they don't have Johan Santana, B.) their bullpen is right there with the Royals, and C.) defensively they are not as sharp as Minnesota. Chance of winning the division? Decent, though not great without the experience factor.

**Projected Order: CF Coco Crisp
2B Ronnie Belliard
C Victor Martinez
DH Travis Hafner
LF Casey Blake
1B Ben Broussard
RF Juan Gonzalez
3B Aaron Boone
SS Jhonny Peralta**

**Projected Staff: R Jake Westbrook
R Kevin Millwood
L C.C. Sabathia
L Cliff Lee
R Scott Elarton**

Pick: 2nd in AL Central; lose out on division on the last day of the season.